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AUTHOR Hartzell, Gerald R.
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ABSTRACT

The effect of the middle school experience upon the pre-adolescent's self-concept development is the focus of this report. Self-concept is defined as an understanding of the self based upon an internal frame of reference. The development of a positive self-concept has been frequently listed as a goal of the middle schools. Five research projects conducted in the early 1970s compared the self-concepts of middle school students with those of control students in conventional forms of intermediate education. The findings of these studies were widely disparate. Both the number of studies reported and the inconsistent results indicate a need for some conclusive research to determine the effects of the middle school on pre-adolescents' self-concept development. (Author/JK)

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The School District of the City of Allentown

EFFECTS OF THE MIDDLE SCHOOL ON SELF-CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT

by

Gerald R. Hartzell,

Reading Consultant

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PART I

INTRODUCTION

Background

The recently completed decade of the 1970's produced a rapidly growing interest in the school organization called the middle school (Romano, Georgiady, and Heald, 1973).

The first middle school probably opened in Bay City, Michigan in 1950 (School District of the City of Allentown, 1980). By the 1969-70 school year, Kealy (1970) found 2,267 such schools in existence in the United States. The most recent national survey of the status of the middle school nearly doubled that total reporting 4,180 middle schools operating in the U.S. during the 1976-77 school year (School District of the City of Allentown, 1980).

During this emergence, the literature has varied in identification of the scope of the middle school as expressed in familiar grade level terms. In an early report issued by the Educational Facilities Laboratories, six different types of grade organizations were mentioned as middle schools: 7-8, 7-8-9, 6-7-8, 6-7-8-9, 5-6-7-8, and 5-6-7-8-9 (Murphy, 1965). In more recent definitions

the two most commone patterns of grade organization have been grades six through eight and grades five through eight (Kindred and others, 1976). Most writers have agreed that the middle school should not include grade 9 (Romano, Georgiady, and Heald, 1973).

The importance of the middle school has not been in the grade levels covered, but in its philosophy and provision for recognizing and meeting the needs of the preadolescents it serves (Romano, Georgiady, and Heald, 1973). The achievement of self-understanding and a stable self-concept has been identified as one of the development tasks for this age group (Vars, 1967). Schoo (1973) concluded that planning an educational program for early adolescents without considering the impact of self-concept would be inappropriate.

Purpose

The School District of the City of Allentown, the district in which this researcher is employed, has become involved in a community-wide controversy concerning proposed middle school units. District studies have stressed declining enrollments and the economical advantages of the proposed change from the traditional 6-3-3 plan to the 4-4-4 plan (School District of the City of Allentown, 1980). Publicized considerations have not focused upon the effect of the middle school experiences upon the self-concept of the preadolescents involved. For this reason, this project was designed to review the

literature related to self-concept development among middle school students. Particular attention was given to those studies which dealt with comparison of the self-concepts of students in a middle school with students in traditional elementary or junior high school environments.

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PART II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The self-concept was defined by Combs and Snygg (1959) as an understanding of the self based upon an internal frame of reference. Gordon (1962) stated that the world of the preadolescent undergoes changes which affect the self concept. Middle schools were developed to fit this period in a student's life when change is rapid (Grooms, 1967).

This project concerned itself with the effect of the middle school experience upon the preadolescent's self-concept development. Literature related to this problem appeared in two forms. A number of writers expressed opinions concerning self-concept development as a goal of the middle school program. Five research studies comparing the self-concept development of middle school students with students in traditional elementary or junior high schools were reported during the last ten years.

Expressed Opinions

The statement of a philosophy or goals of a middle school invariably has included reference to the need of a middle school student to develop a positive self-

concept (Bondi and others, 1978). Curtis (1968) listed providing experiences designed to help the child to understand and accept himself as a purpose of the middle school. Inclusion of such experiences in the middle school curriculum has been emphasized in more recent writings by DeVita, Pumerantz, and Wilklow (1970), Hertlig and Getz (1971), Gatewood and Dilg (1975), and Lounsbury and Vars (1978).

Reported Research

The first reported evaluative study (Trauschke, 1970) compared the self-concept of students in a middle school with students in both grades 5 and 6 in the elementary school and grades 7 and 8 in the junior high school. Comparisons of students' achievement and attitudes were included in this study of 400 randomly selected pupils in Miami, Florida. Based upon scores on Gordon's How I See Myself Scale, students in the middle school held self-concepts at least equal to those of students in the conventional schools. Significant differences at the .001 level were found in favor of the middle school pupils at the seventh grade level only. There were no significant differences favoring the control schools.

Case (1971) also employed Gordon's How I See Myself Scale in his comparative study of fifth graders in Montgomery County, Maryland. A sample of 131 fifth graders in a new middle school were compared with 138 fifth graders in three elementary schools to ascertain the effectiveness

of the new program. The findings of this study produced no differences between the two groups since both groups indicated a decrease in self-concept on the measure used.

A comparison of the group behavior of middle school and junior high school students by Elie (1971) included self-concept of ability to learn among its four variables. A random sample of 108 seventh and eighth grade boys and girls in Michigan were tested using The Michigan General Self-Concept of Ability Scale. No significant differences were found between the middle school and junior high school students on this measure.

Schoo (1971) also included self-concept in his study of middle school and junior high school students. His comparisons of self-concept, social behavior, and attitudes toward school were based upon a student questionnaire completed by a ten percent sample of each grade in thirty-one schools. Included were four 5-8 middle schools, twelve 6-8 middle schools, and fifteen 7-9 junior high schools. Part I of the Student Questionnaire, the Self-Esteem Inventory, was analyzed in terms of three subscales: self-measure, social-measure, and school-measure. This analysis produced two significant results. The students in the 5-8 middle school indicated more positive self-concepts on the self-measure and school-measure subscales than the 6-8 middle school and 7-9 junior high school students. On the social-measure subscale, the 6-8 middle school students had significantly lower self-perceptions

than the 7-9 junior high students. Schoo concluded that preadolescents evidence a more positive self-concept in middle schools housing grades five through eight.

More recently, Soars, Soars, and Pumerantz (1973) produced results favoring more traditional forms of intermediate education. Their investigation of self-perceptions involved 631 pupils in five middle schools and 601 students in five traditional (elementary or junior high) schools in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Only children who had been in their present school for two years were included. Four self-perceptions were measured: 1. Self Concept (how the individual believed himself to be at the moment); 2. Ideal Self (how he would have liked to be or hoped to become); 3. Reflected Self--Classmates(how he thought his classmates looked at him); and 4. Reflected Self--Teachers (how he believed his teachers viewed him). On each of these measures, pupils in the middle school consistently indicated lower self-perceptions than pupils in the traditional settings.

After reviewing their findings, Soars, Soars, and Pumerantz concluded that although the middle school came into being to meet pupils' needs more effectively, it may not yet be meeting their needs more satisfactorily than the traditional setting.

PART III

SUMMARY

Numerous writers have encouraged development of the preadolescent's self-concept through the middle school experience. Self-concept development has been listed frequently among the goals and purposes of the middle school.

Five research projects reported during the early 1970's compared the self-concepts of middle school students with those of control students in conventional forms of intermediate education. The findings from these studies were not consistent. Two studies (Case, 1971; and Elie, 1971) found no significant differences. A third study (Trauschke, 1970) produced significant differences favoring the middle school at the seventh grade level only. One researcher (Schoo, 1971) concluded that a more positive self-concept was evidenced in the 5-8 middle school than in the 6-8 middle school or junior high school The most recently reported comparative study (Soars, Soars, and Pumerantz, 1973), however, produced evidence indicating the development of significantly lower self concepts in the middle school than in traditional elementary or junior high schools.

Both the number of studies reported and the inconsistent results of the completed projects seemed to indicate a need for more conclusive research to determine

the effects of the middle school on preadolescents' self-concept development.

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